

Reading and Print Culture in a 19th C. African American Farm Community

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The Beech Settlement, Rush County, Indiana

Beginning in the 1820’s, many free African Americans left their homes in North Carolina and Virginia and migrated to Indiana where they established settlements, often near Quaker settlements. Many bought land and were successful farmers. Soon after arriving in Indiana, they built churches and schools and began educating their children. The Beech Settlement was unique in that its residents created a lending library, located in the church.

Two families in particular were leaders in the founding of the library: the **Roberts** and **Jeffries** families. Wright Jeffries was the first teacher in the community. After the library closed, he kept the records and some of the books from the collection. His niece, **Mary Jeffries Strong**, kept the collection together after his death, and in 1954 she donated them to the Indiana Historical Society library.

In this project I have used the collection from the settlement library housed in the Indiana Historical Society library to learn more about the individuals who founded the library, their families, and their descendants, and to seek evidence of a legacy of reading and education as demonstrated in the lives of the descendants.

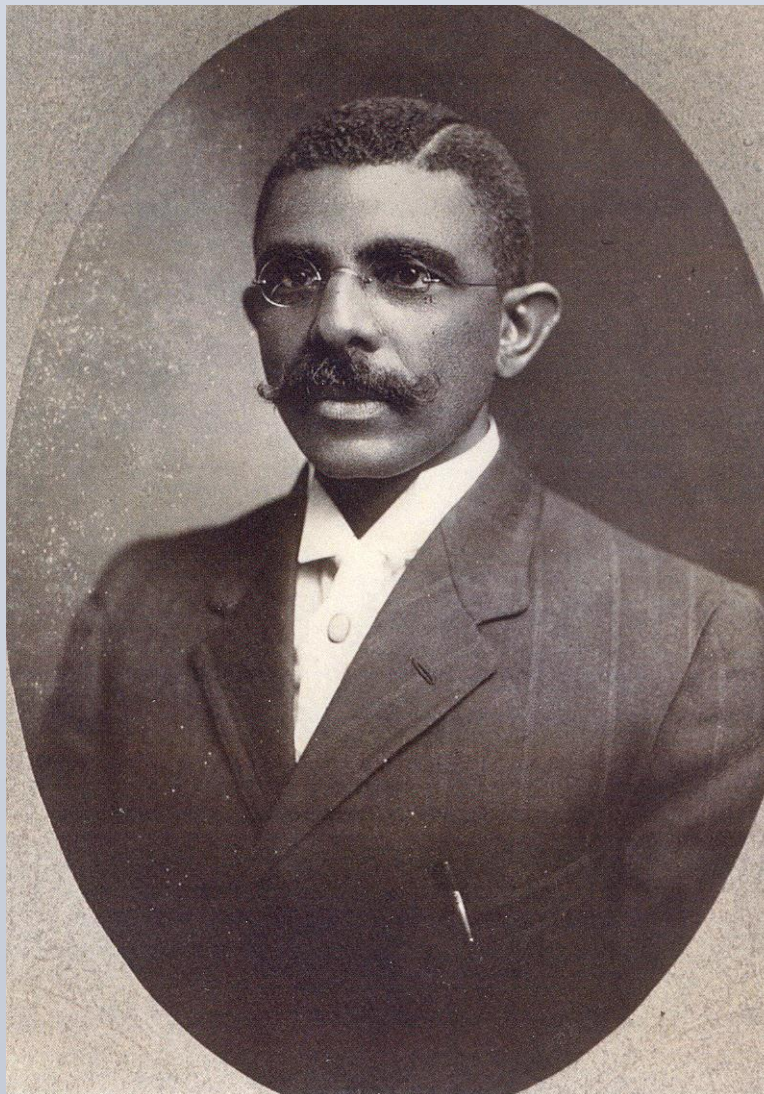
Roberts Family Members

James D. Roberts and his wife both died within a few years of the founding of the Library. Their children were then cared for by members of the Jeffries family, brothers **Macklin** and **Wright Jeffries**. Their son, **Robert R.**, and his wife, remained members of the church throughout their lives, and used the library. Their sons were well-educated and successful as a teacher (**Robert A.**) and physician (**Daniel**).

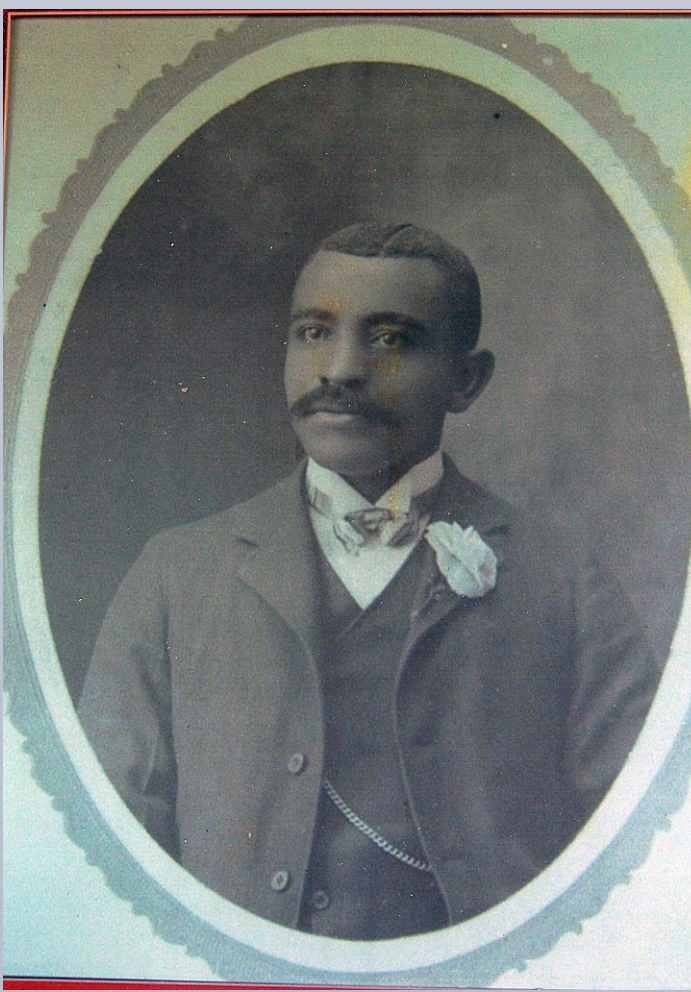
Robert R. and Martha Roberts



Robert Alphaeus Roberts, Teacher



Daniel Roberts, Physician



The Mt. Pleasant Library

One of the churches organized by Beech Settlement residents was the Mt. Pleasant Church, also known as the Beech Church. A school was taught in the church, and they placed their lending library in the church. The church was built on land donated by **James D. Roberts**, who was elected the first Librarian.

From the minutes:
“At the meeting of the Board of Managers of Mount Pleasant Library company April the 30th 1842,

The secretary not being present – Henry Henley is appointed secretary for the day.

The books were received, numbered, and placed in the Library and following by-laws adopted.

Article 2nd That it be the duty of the librarian to loan one volume and only one at a time to any member of the library and that he carefully register the loan, return, and amount of any injury or default.

Article 3rd That any person keeping a book of the library longer than the time specified in each volume, shall pay to the Librarian for the use of the Library .06 ¼ cents for the first weeks default, and 12 ½ for each week thereafter.

Article 4th That it be the duty of the Librarian to examine each book when returned, whether the same be injured or not, if shall have been injured not to loan it again until it shall have been examined by the committee hereinafter proposed to be appointed.

Article 5th That there be two suitable persons annually appointed to examine the Librarian’s register, to see that he take proper care of the books, and, that they, with the Librarian, ases [sic] the damages on each as may have been injured and to report the state and situation of the library once in the year; and as much of lesser as occasion may require.

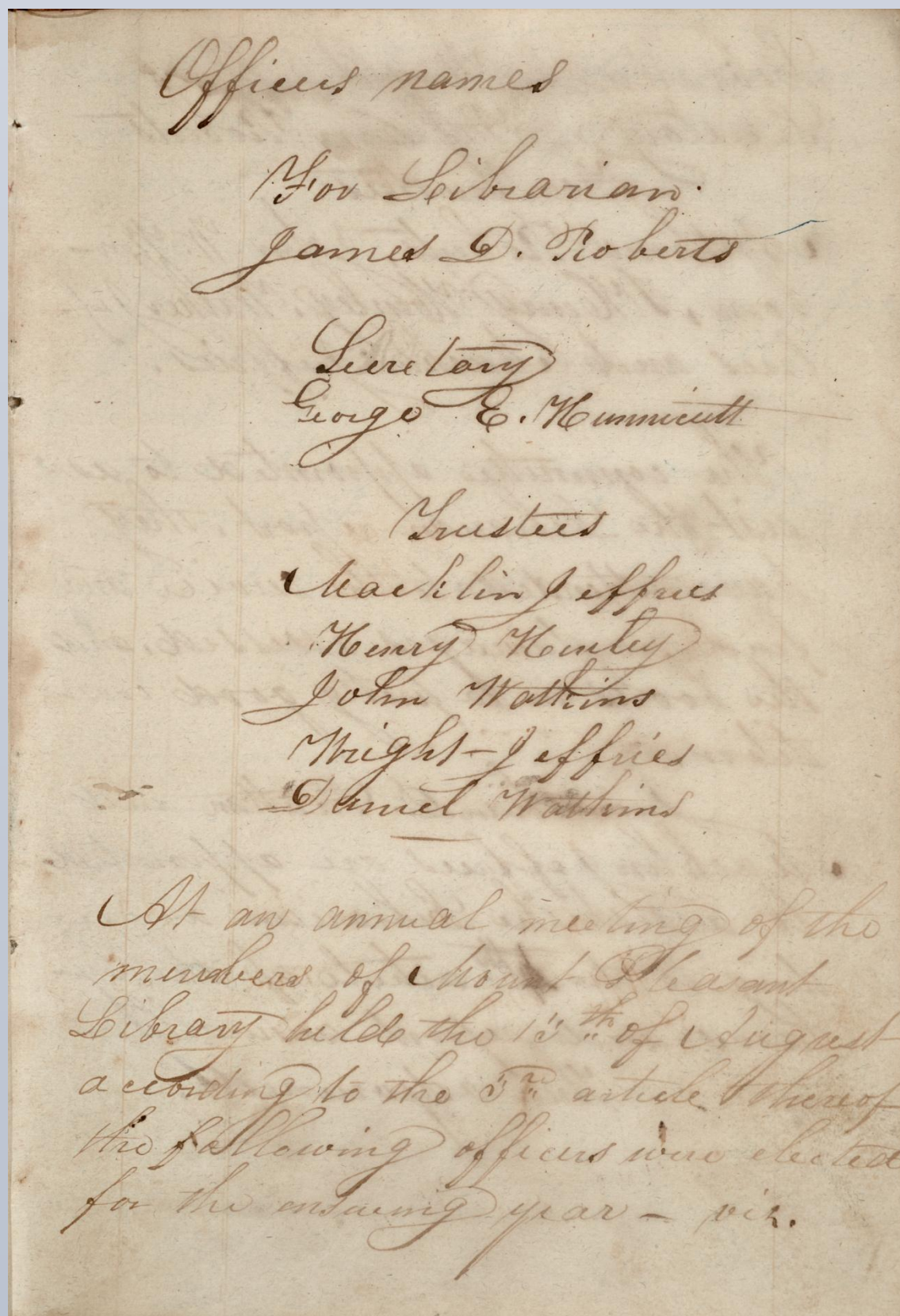
Article 6th After the damage has been assessed on a book, the person in whose hands it was injured shall pay the amount thereof to the Librarian for the use of the library.

Indiana Historical Society, SC2440

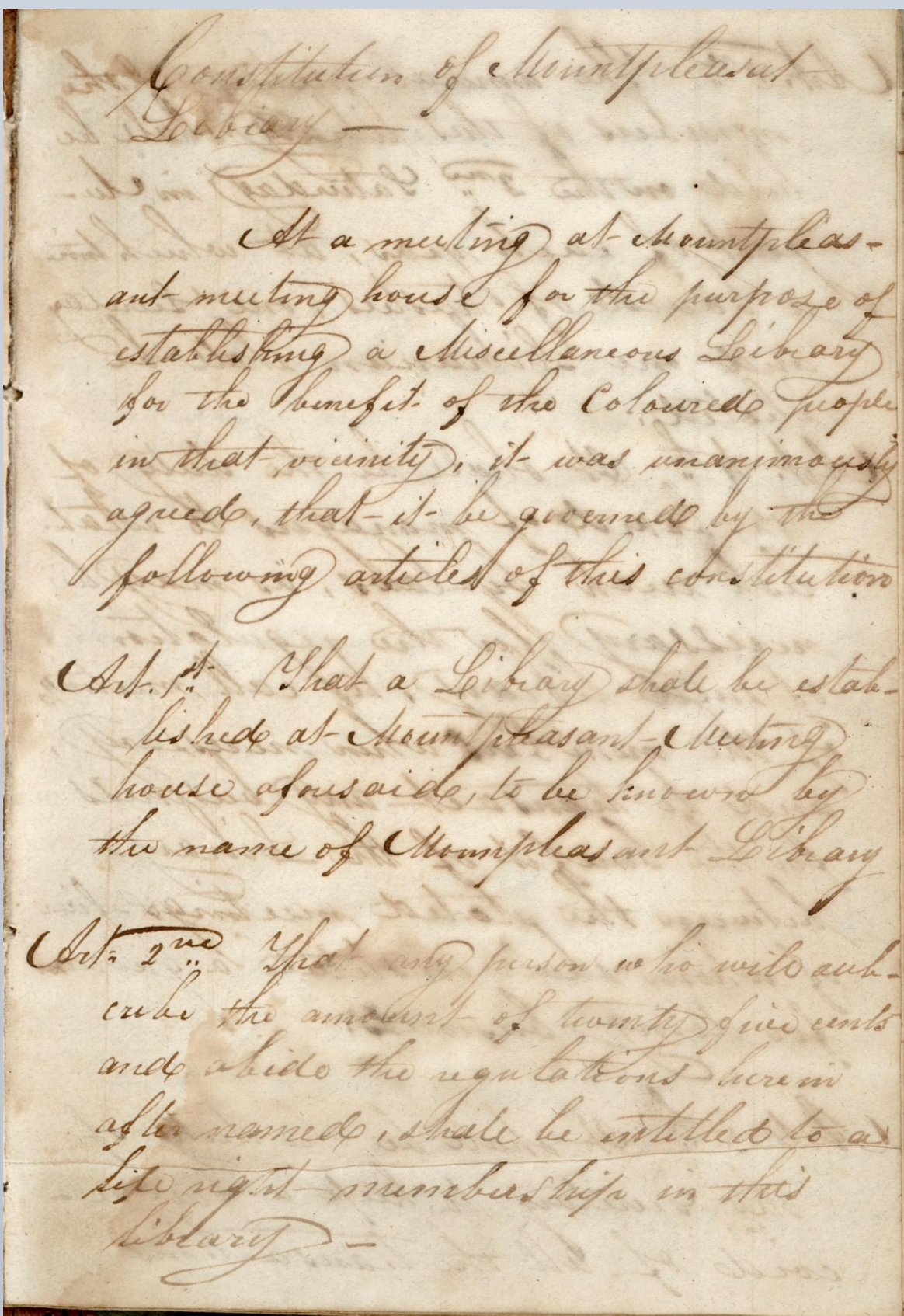


This building was built in the 1860s, replacing the log cabin that originally housed the church and library, and is still used for the annual Homecoming in August.

On October 2, 1840, the Indiana Annual Conference of the A.M.E. Church was organized at this site.



Indiana Historical Society, SC2440



Martha Harris McCurdy grew up in the Beech Settlement. Her parents were founding members of the library, and she taught school in the community. She later became active in the temperance movement, worked for A.M.E. **Bishop Henry M. Turner** in Georgia, edited a women’s church magazine, and became the state Indiana chairman of the W.C.T.U.



Name redacted for electronic distribution.
Roberts Family descendant now working on his family genealogy.